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The New Spectacle: Reading Situationists in David Foster Wallace
by Nathan Caldwell

"I am a woman who appeared on *Late Night with David Letterman* on March 22, 1989." So goes the opening of David Foster Wallace's first widely-read short story. Originally publishing the story as "Late Night" in 1988, Wallace soon changed the title to "My

Appearance." If that opening line and amended title didn't put us in mind of the Situationist International,[1] then the plot and form should have: an actress appearing on *Letterman* tries to determine whether her host is a genuinely kind person or a calculating entertainer, or perhaps both. In keeping with the situationist principle of detournement, Wallace plagiarizes much of the dialogue from a real appearance by Susan St. James in 1987. Still, too often, readers of Wallace's fiction fail to see a connection between the author and the Situationist International—a major oversight. By reading David Foster Wallace in a situationist context, we not only gain a valuable key to his perspicacious social observations: we also realize that Wallace devoted a part of his career to providing a fascinating update to situationist ideas.

Before we go on, it would be useful for the reader to understand what the Situationist International was. The SI was an influential organization of social critics in the 1950s and '60s who used the now-famous term "spectacle" to describe what they saw as a mass media designed to induce passivity across all social strata. The group's position stemmed from a powerful insight by its most prominent member, Guy Debord:

> For classical capitalism, wasted time was time that was not devoted to production . . . But it so happens that by an unexpected turn of events [viz. the advent of mass production and mechanization] modern capitalism needs to increase consumption . . . [T]he new morality already being conveyed in advertising, propaganda and all forms of the dominant spectacle now frankly admits that wasted time is the time spent at work. ("Perspectives" 73)

In other words: in order to stimulate consumption, modern capitalism emphasized to all workers the importance of leisure over labor, knowing that an omnipresence of ads could reconstruct leisure around the exchange of money for entertainment. The entertainments available to society in its leisure—entertainments like sporting events, films, news media, politics-as-theatre,

[1] After all, it was Guy Debord who famously said, "That which appears is good, that which is good appears." See *Society of the Spectacle*, pensée XII

parades, much more—were diverse but all had one thing in common: they were to be watched, not participated in. To situationists, these entertainments seemed to cohere into a 24-hour spectacle for a society of spectators: a society of passive objects who had forgotten they were ever subjects. Spending their leisure time watching other people on TV actually live life, these spectators felt that some unnamable thing was missing from their own lives, some fulfillment, some agency; ultimately, they found leisure to be as boring, disappointing, and somehow isolating as work, despite the wealth of choices available to them. The situationists contended that this was no accident: modern capitalism, by setting individuals' roles as spectators, had determined that the public boredom would turn not to the outrage of active subjects but to the fatalism of passive objects; thus the existing power structure was normalized and accepted by a fatalistic populace. Modern capitalism had emphasized leisure only to covertly drain the color from it; it had deliberately and successfully rendered society fatalistically counterrevolutionary and unable to imagine a more fulfilling kind of life.[2]

Wallace, who claims to have suffered a TV addiction in college, is rightly esteemed as a highly-attenuated social critic in his own right. His work—often dealing with isolation and despair in an America saturated by advertising, entertainment, and commodities—can be best understood in light of the situationists' ideas. If Debord conceived of modern capitalism as declaring that wasted time is the time spent at work, *Wallace seems to observe a new motto for a new stage of capitalism*: "Wasted time is the time spent being advertised to." The spectacle now frankly acknowledges its spectators' boredom and dissatisfaction by rendering those feelings in mass media; it thereby makes them seem fun, communal, meaningful. This postmodern

[2] Situationist ideas were incredibly far-reaching. They are covered in much more detail in Ken Knabb's *Situationist International Anthology*; the information I've briefly given above comes from Debord's "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life" in that anthology, and Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, especially the section titled "It Was," p. 49.

capitalism, as I will call it, has evolved beyond modern capitalism's need to impose boredom covertly, as well as modern capitalism's risk that that boredom might mutate into protest. I will look predominantly at Wallace's first story, "My Appearance," which engaged situationist ideas on a literal level; I'll also briefly consider Wallace's last published story antemortem, "The Suffering Channel" (2004), to show that this new spectacle was not simply a one-time observation for Wallace.

"My Appearance" isn't the only story in the collection *Girl with Curious Hair* to feature a real-life celebrity as a central character, which is perhaps why Wallace included a note on the publishing page he clearly wrote himself: "Where the names of corporate, media, or political figures are used here, those names are meant only to denote figures, images, the stuff of collective dreams . . . [not] actual 3-D persons, living, dead, or otherwise." We should bear in mind, then, that the Letterman that Wallace describes doesn't stand for David Letterman himself, but rather "the stuff of collective dreams"—something larger than Letterman: a social phenomenon. Debord saw advertisements as propaganda for modern capitalism's message, and I believe Wallace, in "My Appearance," constructs *Late Night with David Letterman* as propaganda for postmodern capitalism's message. Letterman consistently mocks advertisements and even the idea of entertainment itself; he appears, more than anything, bored in his position, and bored with the spectacle in general. But as one of the savvy, cynical executives points out in Wallace's story, "'even if something's an anti-show, if it's a hit, it's a *show*'" (188).

In "My Appearance," an accomplished actress named Edilyn (last name not provided) is being prepared for her first appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Her husband and her husband's former boss, Rudy and Ron (respectively), both industry pros and both extremely

media-savvy cynics, warn her grimly that it's Letterman's style to humiliate his guests, that he is almost unparalleled at catching potentially exploitable slip-ups on air. They get Edilyn to agree to wear an ear-piece so they can coach her through every moment of the appearance. She keeps her own ideas of Letterman to herself while Rudy and Ron declaim his nature; to her, Letterman seems a fundamentally sincere, kind person—not manipulative, not cunning. Throughout the appearance itself, her impressions of Letterman clash with the dire warnings and instructions that Ron and Rudy are whispering through the earpiece; we are set up to be alert and take our own impressions of Letterman.

The chief concern of Letterman's show as Wallace presents it seems to be boredom. Recall that, to situationists, boredom was an important part of the spectacle—and also that the spectacle was not supposed to acknowledge this boredom. Rather, the spectacle presented a thousand TV channels; it was up to the spectator to feel that nothing was ever on, even as he uncritically appreciated the fact that he had a thousand channels. In Wallace's depiction of *Letterman*, however, we get the sense that boredom is what the show is actually about. In the week running up to Edilyn's appearance, she watches *Letterman* a lot. That week, he happens to be doing "a series of videotaped skits on the private activities and pastimes of executives at NBC" (175). Perusing one such executive's "huge collection of refrigerator magnets," Letterman comments to the camera, "'Is this entertainment ladies and gentlemen? Or what?'" (176) Letterman's tone is ironic, at once mocking the executive as well as his own show as unentertaining. Letterman seems to be searching for "entertainment, ladies and gentlemen," but all he's found so far is boredom. So he tries some other things. He throws random objects off a roof in slow motion, the kind of thing a 13-year-old does as a last resort when insanely bored (176). In another instance,

> Letterman had Teri Garr put on a Velcro suit and fling herself at a Velcro wall. That night his NBC Bookmobile featured a *1989 Buyer's Guide to New York City Officials*; Letterman held the book up to view while Teri hung behind him, stuck to the wall several feet off the ground. (177)

Garr is hardly up before Letterman turns to the camera and presents the book: it's as though, in crafting the show, he (or rather the producers and writers that he embodies for the audience) hoped that after having exhausted so many options, the sight of Garr flinging herself at a Velcro wall would help Letterman shake off his boredom, but instead he immediately moves on to another half-joke (the book). By the time of Garr's encounter with Velcro, Letterman has done at least a thousand shows; now his attention seems to wander restlessly from subject to subject, searching for something better than what he's seeing right now; even while talking to his guests, he's simultaneously chatting up the audience and Paul Shaffer, and picking his teeth with his index cards.[3] Letterman's persona is almost that of a spectator, a member of the audience, being shuttled from set piece to set piece, bored all the while.

Of course, we should remember the previously-cited maxim espoused by Ron, one of Edilyn's cynical coaches-by-earpiece: "even if something's an anti-show, if it's a hit, it's a *show*." There may be such a thing as "a huge poster that showed David Letterman taking a picture of whoever was taking his picture for the poster"—but it's still a poster of Letterman, and he's still part of the spectacle (189). He performs before an audience of passive objects. His effect is to legitimize his viewers' boredom, to make boredom acceptable, even inevitable. As Czeslaw Milosz wrote, "To identify one's self with the role one is obliged to play brings relief and permits a relaxation of one's vigilance."[4] This audience tunes in every night for the privilege of being bored with David Letterman, the man who makes boredom a punchline. To identify with a bored figure in the spectacle makes boredom more endurable.

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[3] Simultaneous chatting throughout Edilyn's appearance, 190-197; teeth-picking on 186
[4] Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, 1953 (as cited in Marcus 1989, 102)

Letterman also seems to embody a certain disillusionment with the spectacle. He consistently mocks advertisement and even, in a complex way, the very idea of entertainment. Always in love with lists of ten, Letterman (in "My Appearance") shows what he calls the ten worst ads of all time. In one, Edilyn's narration tells us, "a German automobile manufacturer tried to link purchase of its box-shaped car to sexual satisfaction by showing . . . a languid Nordic woman succumbing to the charms of the car's stickshift. 'Well I'm certainly swayed,' Letterman said when the clip had ended. 'Aren't you, ladies and gentlemen?'" (177-178). Even Edilyn, falling asleep on the couch after taking a Xanax, is able to see the ad's clumsy, transparent attempt to link purchase and sex, and she laughs sleepily at Letterman's sarcasm. And yet, however much Letterman may be mocking the ad, his remark in its brevity feels like a shrug, a gesture of indifference. The ad, like the fridge magnets, merits only his irony. Moreover, Letterman's problem with the ad seems to be not its intent but rather its obviousness: he makes fun of its failure to sway him. His dispassionate reaction is instructive: the audience learns to laugh off being stuck in an existence as an object on which advertisements act; it learns to laugh and to shrug whenever the spectacle's machinations come into view. Later in the segment, he goes over a list of pills that strongly resemble candies. His comment to his pal Paul Shaffer—"'Eerie or what?'" (186)—is also a shrug or a "Huh," something that tells the audience that although he's on TV, Letterman is aligned with them in his skeptical view of the spectacle—and, acting as the audience's stand-in, Letterman turns that skepticism into small talk. It's *normal* to see pills shaped like candy; we just say, "Eerie," and pop them into our mouths and move on to the next entertainment.

Of course, this is all a rather cynical view of Letterman—not much like the more positive one Edilyn holds. The tension between Letterman-as-manipulative-entertainer and Letterman-as-

friend is important: it reveals another way in which Wallace engages with situationist ideas. To the SI, the only solution to passivity was direct engagement in what they called "situations." These situations replaced the spectacle's traditional hero-identification with a subjective leading role for a spectator-turned-player.[5] Greil Marcus describes this creatively: "It would be as if one of the fans who traditionally jumps from the stands during a World Series game then joined the contest, and got everyone playing a new game" (100). In "My Appearance," everything before the titular event is a buildup, as Rudy and Ron prep Edilyn for fifteen minutes of battle with a cunning manipulator, an arm of the spectacle. Edilyn is skeptical of their view, holding the impression that Letterman is basically a sincere person, not an arm of anything. This counterpoint sets up a tension in the reader as she finally steps out on-stage. Recall that Rudy and Ron are counselling her via earpiece hidden by her hair. Letterman welcomes her to the show:

> "Terribly, nay, *grotesquely* nice to see you," Letterman said.
> "He's scanning for pretensions," crackled my ear. "Pockets of naive self-importance. Something to stick a pin in. Anything."
> [. . .] I yawned, touching my ear absently. (190)

Each of the important components of the scene is presented in that quote: Letterman himself, somewhat ambiguous; Ron and Rudy, analytical and grim; and Edilyn, firm in her conviction of Letterman's ordinariness. Armed with the dialectic between her view and that of her counsellors, we are set up to scan Letterman's words ourselves, looking for the kinds of things Rudy and Ron might see. That is, we are actively engaged.

We may also be hoping to see in Letterman what Edilyn sees: sincerity. The situationists felt deeply the anguish of being merely a spectator, of always emulating the idealized versions of ourselves presented in the spectacle (Marcus 103). Wallace adds something important, which he

[5] Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations" (as it appears in Knabb, 25)

would address in more depth in "The Suffering Channel" in 2004: without the possibility of authenticity in our own lives, we sublimate our desire for authenticity, projecting it onto celebrities that we come to think of as our friends. Not just Letterman, but (in 1988) Ronald Reagan, Michael Dukakis, George H.W. Bush. To situationists, this is universal, and that seems to be why Wallace is playing with it: he wants to ensure our engagement. Unfortunately, Wallace's efforts falter when, inevitably, Edilyn reaches her own conclusion about Letterman: that he is sincere after all. It's a delightful ending that satisfies the reader's desire to see Letterman as fundamentally good—but the substance of her conclusion isn't the point. Edilyn resolves the tension of Letterman's nature for us, eliminating our incentive to be active participants. Because the plot more or less demanded a conclusion of some kind, this is a flaw in the story's form.

But Wallace would continue to refine his direct engagement of the reader even as he continued to advance his observations of the new spectacle's representation of boredom. To pick one example: his 2004 short story "The Suffering Channel" deals beautifully with

> the conflict between the subjective centrality of our lives versus our awareness of its objective insignificance . . . the feeling that celebrities were your intimate friends, coupled with the inchoate awareness that untold millions of people felt the same way—and that the celebrities themselves did not . . . [and] the world altering pain of accepting one's individual flaws and limitations and the tautological unattainability of our dreams . . . (284-285)

Moreover, Wallace finds a devastatingly effective way to forcefully engage the audience: one of the central characters in the story makes sculptures out of excrement—human excrement. The frankness with which Wallace discusses the man's pieces—as well as the frankness of the conversations between characters who react to the pieces—ensures both our disgust and our fascination. Wallace seems to know very well what he's doing, as revealed in an exchange between a journalist and the editor to whom he's trying to pitch the story of the sculptures:

> "[It's] wholly common and universal," Atwater had said. "Everyone has personal experience with shit."
>
> "But personal *private* experience . . . It's one of those things people don't want to be reminded of. That's why nobody talks about it." (244)

Everyone will react, and everyone's reaction will be personal, visceral. All the better for the audience to be engaged when Wallace discusses more political, situationist material elsewhere in the story.

And yet Wallace's perspective on the spectacle and our ability to remain active in its face seems consistently less hopeful than that of the Situationist International. Situationists called for the direct engagement of spectators via participation in active situations; by contrast, whatever engagement we feel reading "The Suffering Channel" is tempered by our knowledge that the characters work in 1 World Trade Center in July, 2001. And, in "My Appearance," Edilyn ultimately comes to define herself more by her appearance on Letterman than her accomplishments as an actress; this is why the first line in the story is "I am a woman who appeared," rather than, as she had insisted to Letterman during her appearance, "I am a woman who acts."[6] Perhaps Wallace, writing decades after the activity of the Situationist International, had seen the failure of that group to inspire the kind of sweeping societal change they hoped for. Perhaps he sees that the spectacle's new tendency to reflect boredom and dissatisfaction back at the spectator—its new tendency to make those feelings acceptable and inevitable—represents a successful defusing of the situationist idea. Boredom cannot turn to outrage if boredom itself is a loveable facet of life under postmodern capitalism.

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[6] For this insistence, see "My Appearance," 191.

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